Library Vandals

By THOMAS POWERS.

"THEYRE my books just as much as yours; books belong to the people, that's what they were written for and the men who wrote 'em would be the first to say they wanted me or anybody who could get any benefit from their books to have them."

With such sophistry a young mechanic met the charge that he had been stealing books from the New York Public Library for more than three years. By means of a series of cards issued to fictitious names he had acquired a working library of his own, and when a policeman followed him to his home and caught him "with the goods," he seemed but little dismayed.

"I'm a mechanic," said he, "and I mean to be an inventor. I needed the help these books could give and I did not have money to buy them. Knowledge belongs to everybody and nobody can steal it."

The specific complaint under which he was arraigned in court was the theft of one book, Bergson's "Creative Evolution," and the magistrate asked the ambitious seeker after knowledge if he did not agree that this living author had some rights in his work, that is, if he did not deserve a royalty payment on all copies sold. His answer was singular.

"No," said he, "that notion is all wrong. If Bergson hadn't discovered these things somebody else would. He was just a messenger to bring new ideas to the people."

"And do you also think that if Shakespeare had not written 'King Lear,' somebody else would have written it?" queried the magistrate.

"Sure thing," said the ambitious young man.

Although he produced witnesses to prove that he was of good character, lived quietly, studied by himself and went to night classes, there was nothing to do but to send him to the penitentiary for a year. The case was flagrant and while admitting taking the books the young man declared he was not guilty of any crime. Unmoved he heard the sentence and the last thing he said to the court was to beg the loan of a couple of law books to read while he was a prisoner.

Erastus Brugge is 24 years old and alone in the world. He is like Lord Verulam in this respect that he considers all human knowledge to be his province. Also like Queen Elizabeth's Chief Justice, unless history maligns that person, Erastus Brugge is lacking in a certain moral distinction between what is mine and what is thine. He exhibited this obliquity of vision at the New York Public Library when he carried off thirty books without observing the formality of having the titles entered on a card with the promise to return them at the expiration of two weeks.

Commonly wholesale theft of books cover volumes in a particular subject and by consulting data filed in the circulation room and other data held in the general reading room it is not difficult to narrow suspicion to include but a few readers and by observing these the thief may be found out.

But Brugge was interested in art as well as science, and indeed even included music in the catholicity of his taste, as was shown when the books were finally recovered, for they included two valuable opera scores. The Stone Age, the Einstein Theory, the Elimination of the Eidolon are a few of the fields where his curiosity wandered. Authors as different as Froude and Benedetto Croce appealed to him.

Finally the method used by Brugge in getting by the guardians at the doors of the library came to light. It was simplicity itself. He possessed a card and after loading up with a volume or two in the reading room on the top floor it was his custom to descend to the circulation department, turn in a piece of light fiction and choose another. These trivial books, said Mr. Brugge when he finally made his confession, he never read but used for a blind. He would show them to the guard at the door, receive his "all correct, sir," bow politely and pass out.

Arrived at his little back room Erastus had only to take off his coat and remove from a voluminous pocket he had sewed in the middle of the rear of the garment a quite different kind of book, which the library might long look for and not find.

With continued success Erastus grew careless. One day in going out the door at Forty-second street he dropped a pencil and stooped to pick it up. The attitude he assumed plainly revealed to an attendant the outlines of a book.

That attendant said nothing at the time but he remembered the name on the card and reported the matter to Mr. Lydenberg, in charge of the general reference department. Erastus, meanwhile, went on his way as he had done a hundred times before.

But when he was leaving the reading room on a subsequent expedition he was asked to descend to the catalogue room on the second floor of the building and there requested

The rotunda in the New York Public Library.

to remove his coat. He refused to do so but the coat was removed just the same and in the secret pocket a book of biography, embellished with valuable steel engravings, and long out of print, was turned up.

Erastus was surprised. He turned pale and said he couldn't account for the book being found there unless it was due to black magic. He was quite at a loss, too, to account for the thirty other volumes found in his little room on the far East Side. Finally he burst into tears and confessed that he had "borrowed the books indefinitely in order to broaden his education."

Tears, as a rule, accompany a confession of book stealing in that uneasy catalogue chamber where scarcely a week passes without a suspect being examined. The officials of the Library are slow to turn the suspect over to the law unless there is a clear case against him of protracted and deliberate stealing.

Besides the obvious reason for clemency toward first offenders, there are others. A good one is that often a Magistrate before whom the petty thief is brought dismisses him with a reprimand. In the Brugge case clemency would have been misplaced and the parallel between him and Lord Verulam stops short. Bacon's punishment was banishment to his own estate, but Brugge got a year in the penitentiary.

For tricks that are vain the thieves of the public library are peculiar. In countless ways they seek to circumvent the watchfulness of custodian and guardian and only in the long run are their tricks really "vain." New wrinkles in petty thievery such as fall under the head of mutilation are constantly being tried and for a time these succeed; at length suspicion heightens into certainty and the perpetrator is hauled up and confronted with the evidence against him.

"It is an old story," said Harry M. Lydenberg, who as head of the general reference department, hears and passes on the different phases of this sort of delinquency, "and only in the originality sometimes displayed by the thieves is there to be detected a kind of novelty. The library has to deal with the grossly ignorant who misapprehend, with the ordinary and extraordinary thief, with the willful depredator who commits an evil deed from pure (or impure) meanness, and with the criminal insane.

"In the years since the war the library has suffered more from these persons than in any corresponding length of time in its existence as a triune foundation. But, as I said, the only new things about thefts and mutilation and defacements of books are offered by the enemy.

"Book thieves are not the worst or commonest of what we call the 'enemy' that we have to guard our treasure against. Many of these persons are quite sincere, or may be, in thinking they are entitled to knowledge, however acquired, but there can be no excuse for the mutilators of books. What they do cannot be laid to misapprehension or ignorance.

"These persons infest every department of the library. They are cunning and too often get away with a long extract, sometimes a complete chapter out of some book of which we have but one copy, or a unique illustration, or indeed with anything they covet. In the Geneological room a reader sees a crest that would do, he thinks, nicely for his own family. There is only one way, he thinks, he can get it so he mutilates a costly book.

"Malicious mischief is responsible for many mutilations, and for other destructive things done to books. It would surprise you to learn how many persons who frequent the reading room, underline page after page of a book and write their empty lucubrations in the margins. The mutilators have to supply an instrument which the guardians cannot easily detect; a favorite one is a safety razor blade, but all the defacers of books need is a pencil.

"When we catch a mutilator 'red handed' we have a case to refer to the law but we handle the defacer ourselves. We take him to the catalogue chamber and make him rub out and clean up the marks of his mischief. As he has to do this under the eyes of a score of clerks generally his humiliation is extreme and punishment enough. We feel pretty sure that he won't do it again."

There is the case of a college boy who aspired to be a playwright, and to fit himself for that profession he stole from the collections 38 volumes dealing with acting, writing and criticism. When these were found hidden in odd places about his home they had been cut up and arranged in groups under separate heads, as The Scenario, The Motive, The Protagonist, etc.—a complete system of his own. When he confessed he said that he had made great progress in his chosen art and intended as soon as his first play should be accepted to repay in full for the instruction it had unwittingly afforded him. It may be added that five of the stolen volumes were so rare and so highly valued by the library that it refused to lend them and how the ambitious embryo dramatist got them out of the bulding is still a mystery.

"Thefts, mutilations, defacements are constantly going on in all departments," remarked Mr. Lydenberg, "and under the first head we include borrowings under misapprehension. It takes some time for us to discover that a book is really missing. Sometimes when it is reported so we find it on a wrong shelf after diligent search. Sometimes a book will be returned after it has been kept out a month or longer. Such a book was borrowed by somebody who did not know that a record ought to have been made of it. A book was recently returned to the Astor Foundation that was taken from the old library in Astor place sixty years ago.

"As I said, all departments are in a measure looted, but the greatest loss occurs in reference works and pamphlets having to do with business information, statistics and conditions. A pamphlet is easily dropped into a pocket and carried off and, of course, there are 100 individuals who find use for a business manual to one who would like to carry off a volume by Benedetto Croce."

A queer contempt for books is, in the opinion of the librarians, at the bottom of a desire to mark them up or otherwise deface them. It begins, they say, with school books. Even a cursory examination of the text books furnished to the children of the public schools by the Board of Education shows that this kind of mischief often begins early. From writing silly rhymes and scrawls and would-be facetious sayings in the school books the habit grows, and when as older readers they advantage themselves of this library's great opportunity they seem unable to restrain the impulse to deface.

An Impromptu Seance

Continued from Preceding Page.

istence, I think. I am not a book learned or college bred person, you know . . . just a remotely rural old maid . . . whose neighborhood friends are very kind to her, to be sure . . . but when I was a child, I found I had the second sight——"

"I should say that these messages transmitted through you prove you are a medium."

"Thank you. But, as I have said, I never have been developed. And the work tires me out. It is very, very exhausting . . . I — have not been inviting this experience, I assure you—and—I—can't quite—understand—Norah?—Oh, yes, yes, yes, ma'am——"

Her voice became feeble. She fell back in her chair. Her eyes glazed —then closed. Her face was grayish white. The color left her lips. She appeared to be dead . . . I was scared; and only became reassured when a new feminine voice, in a slightly foreign accent, began to talk to me about music.

The communicator expressed anxiety I should know she was "associated with singing," thanked me for my interest in psychic research, and advised me to go ahead with my plans, for I was on the right path. This Sibylline utterance smacked of "fortune telling," but far from me be it to asperse or derogate a psychic wireless. . . .

The sender spoke English with a quaint, faint foreign accent and droll little speech twists. I cut in to ask the name of the lady and was agreeably thrilled (although not surprised; I was beyond that) when she told me she was Parepa Rosa. "I am ver' glad this gentleman is here now," says Mme. Rosa. (Gentleman bows. Always be polite to spirits. You never can tell when you may be shucked yourself, you know; and it is prudent and politic to have a stand in.)

"He will tell you about me. I want to ask him to give you information about me. It was your interest in music that attracted me to you. This little one" (communicator now addresses me)—"is anxious to go on in music and she shall have her wish. . . . You will tell her about me, please." My friend's spell of mediumship was ended abruptly.

Haggard and worn, she said in her own voice: "That was Parepa Rosa, wasn't it? I generally know when she comes, just as I know when my sister comes. She has a queer name, hasn't she? I have been calling her Rosa, and have been imagining her to be young and girlish; for she behaves young. She is humorous and fond of fun, and has played practical jokes on me—such as hiding things."

Only very old timers in musical affairs remember Parepa Rosa. She has been dead for forty-eight years. Her biography, however, is in all the standard reference works.

Miss Parepa, then a celebrated operatic soprano, at New York in 1867 met and married Carl Rosa, impresario; founder of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, Mme. Parepa Rosa died in 1874; and in memory of her Carl Rosa founded and endowed a Parepa Rosa scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in London, England.

Outside of her psychical experience the Vermont amateur medium in her secluded home, away off the beaten track, and in her extremely restricted physical life knew nothing about Parepa Rosa, and had no ordinary means of knowing anything or hearing anything about Parepa Rosa. She had, however, an intense interest in music, along with a constant regret that her own vocal talent, which was considerable, had not been educated, cultivated and publicly used. These circumstances faintly illuminate but do not brightly explain an incident in "communication" which, beyond reasonable doubt, presents features of extraordinary interest.

Recalling that Miss Blank had stated the disembodied Indian, Oneonta, had saved a human life, I asked for details.

"Yes. His intervention prevented a housebuilding workman from being killed. This happened not very long ago."

"I understand you to say that even although you knew the man could not be ended, or killed, in the ordinary sense of the word, you did not want him to be apparently killed."

"Certainly not. He was not ready to go. His education in his present earth life was not completed. Interrupted terms of existence are not satisfactory. A person, cut off untimely, may have to come back and begin all over again. The man to whom I have referred was busy on a high structure with some other men. While I was walking down the street I was watching them. Against the building under construction was a shed, or leanto. . . . A man suddenly lost footing or balance and fell—to certain death, according to appearances.

" 'Oh, Oneonta, save him, save him. Don't let that man be killed.' I cried, in great distress.

"Down came the man—gently—to the shelving shed roof, rolled off it, and landed, gently, on a rubbish heap.

"Something had broken his fall . . . I knew what—I knew who—had caught him, and 'Oh, thank you, thank you, Oneonta,' said I."

My friend's "mediumistic" experience had an injurious or exhausting physical effect. She was in bed for a week, ill with what the physician who attended her described as a nervous collapse. He told me he had known her for twenty-five years; that she is an unusual character, remarkably strenuous and energetic in spite of severe sicknesses; "a wonder for her age,"—and that she must have been overdoing.

I agreed with him, without entering into descriptive details.